



CAMPUS FIRE SAFETY CODE TALK

Campus Fire Safety e-NewZone

College Initiation-His and Mine

By

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College move-in day finally arrived. When I went to college, students moved in clothes and other personal essentials. The college kids of today are different. I was impressed at how accommodating upperclassmen were about helping the freshmen move in. There was an army of students wearing golf shirts bearing the names of fraternities and sororities, waiting at the front door to carry boxes up the stairs and elevators. Some of these helper students were seen carrying in television sets, videogames, small refrigerators, microwave ovens, and a myriad of other essential and unessential appliances.

Based on the architecture of the dormitory, I estimate that it was built in the late 1950s or early 1960s. When I saw all of these electrical appliances being moved in, I was concerned. Would there be enough receptacles to safely handle all of these loads? Would there be adequate circuit capacity in the electrical system to handle all of these loads? When we got to the dorm room, I looked around and noted that there were an adequate number of grounding-type receptacles. The receptacles were in good condition, with good blade retention. I was surprised and pleased to see this, and then it occurred to me, they have been dealing with thousands of teenagers per year for over 100 years. They know what kind of junk these kids are moving in. But good infrastructure alone is not sufficient. Basic electrical safety rules must be followed to prevent electrical fires. Wise use of receptacles is essential. The kids brought in lots of power strips, officially referred to as relocatable power taps. They also brought in lots of extension cords, many of which were light duty.

I saw a small refrigerator plugged into a small gauge extension cord. I told the student who did this that it was a fire hazard, and amazingly he listened to this advice from an adult. But I really wonder about the myriad of electrical problems I didn't see; I suspect that there were hazards in many of the dorm rooms. The number one priority of the new students was internet access. This superseded the concept of opening boxes and hanging up clothes. Everywhere I looked, I saw students with unopened boxes stacked up undisturbed. Meanwhile, the new student was trying to get onto this school's local area network. Again, the school had seen all of this before. Several information services staff people were patrolling the hall, passing out Ethernet cables to get the students online. The IS personnel offered assistance, but this being an engineering school, the majority of students would not ask for directions. Most of the students were able to get into the network and once online, the kids surfed to their favorite sites and sent instant messages to their friends. Meanwhile, parents, recognizing a familiar pattern, gave up waiting for the kids to get off the computer, so the



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opening of boxes and hanging of clothes became a parental responsibility. Eventually, my son and his roommate were satisfied that the network was the best they had seen, so they could now go about the more mundane tasks.'

College is a difficult transition time for parents, as well as for students. Those of us whose professional lives have always involved safety probably worry the most. That, no doubt, makes us the most irritating parents. After all, kids consider themselves to be immortal; it's we adults who know they're not. Over the years, we have made them wear seat belts, bicycle helmets, and other safety equipment, even when we were told that their friends' parents didn't impose such unreasonable rules. So how can parents ensure that their kids will be safe when there is no one around to nag them?

My solution to this was to send my son to a school where they have excellent programs in electrical engineering and fire protection engineering. The presence of these two programs ensures that there is a safety culture at the school. That may be a sneaky, underhanded way to ensure that your kids will be safe, but it works for me. As I drove home I thought about how much money room and board in the dorms was going to cost. I thought about how much I could save if he got an apartment. Then I drove by apartments that had "for rent" signs prominently displayed in the windows. These buildings appeared to be very old and somewhat rundown. It struck me that these old buildings probably didn't have adequate wiring. It is also extremely unlikely that they had sprinklers. And I remember reading a report recently that claimed students are at greatest danger in unregulated, off-campus housing. Hmmm. Something else for me to worry about in the future.

Note: September is Campus Fire Safety Month



The Center for Campus Fire Safety



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